Unitarian Horizons

January 15, 1938

MOUNTAINEERING ON MOLEHILLS

THE phrase comes from a story by C. E. Montague, in which four officers — three of them British and one French — are discussing the almost unbelievable attitude of most army officers, in the early months of the war, with regard to strict matters of military procedure and official prerogative. All that sort of business seems

to them now like very ancient history — people standing on their dignity when the lives of thousands of men were at stake, stickling for their rights when momentous issues were hanging in the balance. Then the Frenchman strikes off the telling phrase, "mountaineering on molehills."

In one way or another, we all do it. Some small obstacle in our path, which in reality is no bigger than a molehill, becomes magnified in our mind's eye until it assumes the proportions of a mountain; and then we take it with the deadly seriousness of an expedition for the conquest of Mount Everest, assembling all the paraphernalia necessary for a successful assault upon one of the giants of the Canadian Rockies or the Himalayas, working ourselves up to a terrific pitch of excitement and courage, only to discover after a while that one quiet, resolute step will take us completely over it.

It wasn't Mount McKinley, after all, nor Nanga Parbat. It was just a molehill!

SHEER WASTE OF ENERGY

PROVIDED we discover what we are doing with reasonable promptness, and also provided we only let it happen very occasionally, I don't suppose there is any serious harm in such mountaineering. Within very strict limits, it may be merely a source of innocent merriment—to our friends if not to ourselves.

But the danger of such indulgence is its habit-forming propensity; and the man who lets himself become its victim is in a parlous plight. For it drains off energy, of mind and nerves and morale, in terrific quantities. It seems to me a safe guess that it causes more breakdowns and collapses than any half-dozen of the reasons usually assigned for such events. It is sheer waste of energy, with the ill effects pyramiding like the losses of a man who has bought on a narrow margin in a falling market. Unless it can be stopped, there is nothing ahead except a major disaster.

THE FUNDAMENTAL CAUSE

WHAT has really happened in such a case is that a man's sense of relative values has become hopelessly distorted. He no longer has any true sense of perspective. He sees the things immediately in front of his eyes without any awareness of the background against which they must be placed if they are to be seen accurately and judged reasonably. His view of the world is absurdly twisted into a caricature of the facts. His attitude toward life is tragically mistaken. He has lost his sense of proportion and his sense of humor. He is like a little child waking suddenly out of a terrifying nightmare, not knowing where he is, or what is happening, or what is likely to happen next, but filled with a panic of

foreboding. As a human being, such a person is for the moment useless; and of course he is indescribably miserable.

It's all a matter of vision. It hasn't anything to do with morals or motives. What has gone wrong is not a man's character or principles, but his ability to see things as they actually are. What he needs is not reformation or redemption, but a new pair of glasses, with lenses that will correct the distortion of his present vision and bring the outer world into focus before his deluded and worried eyes.

THE BUSINESS OF RELIGION

THIS is precisely what a modern religion is intended to do for a generation that is peculiarly liable to go off on mountaineering expeditions on molehills. The old language of salvation from sin and escape from the everlasting torments of hell is no longer taken seriously by most intelligent people, but its evil effects are still lingering among us — especially among those who call themselves religious liberals — for we have been so busy explaining that religion does not mean what it used to mean that we have devoted very little time to figuring out what it can mean and must mean today.

The first business of any religion worth bothering with today is to enable those who are willing

to pay the price for it to see clearly the real nature of the world in which they are living, and the real measure of responsibility which properly falls upon their shoulders. A man whose religion does this for him will be steady and sane, effective and happy, unafraid and undismayed, no matter what life does to him.

THE BUSINESS OF CHURCHES

CHURCHES are the organized expression of religion in human life. They are the medium through which the values of religion are transmitted and shared, but their worth is no greater than that of the values they offer to men. If what our modern world most needs is the clear vision which it is the business of religion to give, and if churches today are actually able to teach men how to obtain that vision, then there can be no question as to the value of churches nor as to the universal support they will deserve. The only question, so far as the churches are concerned, is whether they can in fact teach what they are supposed to teach; and the only question, so far as the response of the world is concerned, is whether men and women are prepared to pay the price, in terms of personal effort and discipline, which the learning process necessarily involves. Both questions are searching and disturbing. No church that dodges either can reasonably expect to survive.

FOR Unitarians, at the present moment, neither question can have a full or satisfactory answer. Honesty compels us to confess that our ministers do not know how to teach, with anything like the necessary skill, the practical methods of spiritual living which constitute the religious life. Nor, on the other hand, are our people ready to take their religion with sufficient seriousness to learn what our churches ought to be teaching. The exceptions, in both cases, are numerous and notable; but the general condition is, I think, such as to justify the serious misgivings which were reported by the Commission of Appraisal two years ago, when they spoke of the widespread demand among Unitarians for a renewal of spiritual power throughout our fellowship.

But it is also true — and this is the most hopeful and reassuring aspect of our present revival of confidence — that Unitarians are turning their attention, both ministers and people, as never before, to the creation of ways and means to cultivate the religious life. The gratifying response which has been made to the new hymn book is only one of many indications that Unitarians are deeply concerned to make use of every available tool in the upbuilding of the spiritual life of our churches. So far as the general denominational

leaders can help, the present administration is committed to this task as its first major policy, and already it is clearly evident that the great body of our constituency will eagerly welcome every effort in this direction.

The Unitarian Church can command brains enough, and devotion enough, and (last but not least) money enough, to carry through any project which it sincerely regards as important. Just as soon as we all agree to put our minds to work upon making our churches effective centers for the development of spiritual insight and power, the immediate goal will already be in sight. But the one essential thing is that we should care enough to do it.

A FIRST STEP

EARLY in February, a pamphlet of Lenten Devotional Readings will be published by The Beacon Press. It will not be distributed free of charge, but will be sold for a small amount to cover the actual cost. It is intended for use by Unitarians, individually or in small groups, during the Lenten season of 1938.

I earnestly hope that our ministers will urge the people of their churches to buy and use this pamphlet. I earnestly hope that thousands of Unitarian men and women will avail themselves of this manual of spiritual power and growth.

It may well be the initial step in a new advance toward the kingdoms of spiritual attainment — not only for those who use it, in the development of their own inner life, but through them for the spiritual enrichment of our Church as a whole.

F. M. E.

NOTE

Unitarian Horizons will be sent without cost to any person wishing to receive it who will send a request for it to the American Unitarian Association. It is not distributed in bulk, even to Unitarian churches. The cost of publication is not charged to the regular budget of the Association, but is met by voluntary contributions, which may be sent to the Treasurer, 25 Beacon Street, Boston, marked for this purpose. The mailing list for the present issue contains 3500 names.

Volume I UNITARIAN HORIZONS Number 5

Published by The Beacon Press, Inc. on the fifteenth day of each month from September to June inclusive.

American Unitarian Association
25 Beacon Street, Boston, Mass.
Frederick M. Eliot, *President* Parker E. Marean, *Treasurer*

Printed in the U. S. A.